# U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico 1898...

Las Aguilas Blancas, shown here flying the Puerto Rican flag, were one of the armed groups which fought Spanish colonialism and resisted the U.S. invasion and occupation in 1898. The U.S. imposed martial law for several years to suppress the guerrilla resistance.

**What is colonialism?**

Colonialism is the practice by one nation of controlling another nation's economy, social structure, and defense through the use of force. Puerto Rico has been on the United Nations Decolonization Committee's list of colonies since 1973. The U.N. proclaims each year that Puerto Rico has the "right to self-determination and independence."

**What is the history of colonialism in Puerto Rico?**

Puerto Rico was a colony of Spain from roughly 1500-1900. In the late 1800s, Spain was declining as a world colonial power. Anti-colonial forces in Puerto Rico realized this and forced Spain to grant the island autonomy in 1897. But the United States also perceived Spain's weakness and in 1898, war broke out between them. In a period of expansion, the U.S. easily defeated Spain and took control of Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico at the signing of the Treaty of Paris. When the U.S. took control, it changed the Puerto Rican economy to serve U.S. interests. First a one-crop economy was developed based on sugar cane. Then, in the 1950s, "Operation Bootstrap" encouraged light industry. In the 1960s, when it became apparent that "heavy" industry was more profitable, highly polluting electronic, chemical and pharmaceutical plants were built. This type of development has not benefitted Puerto Ricans, nor was it meant to. Millions of Puerto Ricans were forced to migrate to the U.S. in search of work, because industrialization provided few jobs.

**Why is Puerto Rico important to the United States?**

Puerto Rico is strategically located at the mouth of the Caribbean, controlling sea lanes to Africa and the Middle East. It has many natural resources, including copper, nickel and off-shore oil. The island is perfectly situated for military strikes against other Caribbean islands and Central America. For example, the 1983 invasion of Grenada was launched from Puerto Rico. Thirteen percent of all the island's arable land is taken up by U.S. military bases including Roosevelt Roads, the largest naval base in the Western hemisphere.

**What are the effects of U.S. colonialism on the Puerto Rican people both on the island and here in the U.S.?**

**19.5% official unemployment
**per capita income $5,400 in 1988
**60% are under the poverty level and receive food stamps
**highly polluted water and air
**drug traffic amounting to millions of dollars annually
**violent attacks and armed robberies up 270% over the past 5 years
**83,000 heroin addicts and 800,000 alcoholics in Puerto Rico
**60% drop-out rate from public schools
**41.6% of women and 25% of men are sterilized
**highest suicide rate in the world
**75% growth in crime rate in the last 10 years
**Higher rate of new AIDS cases than anywhere in the U.S.

These are some of the results of colonialism. Others are not as obvious. Colonial mentality, when a colonized people views itself as inferior and dependent on the colonizer, is a hideous result of colonialism. The U.S. has encouraged this development by undermining the attitude of Puerto Ricans towards themselves, their culture and heritage. Puerto Ricans are told that George Washington is the father of their country. It is illegal to fly the Puerto Rican flag without the U.S. flag next to it.

**What is Puerto Rico's current status?**

The U.S. presently refers to Puerto Rico as a commonwealth. Historically, this government has classified Puerto Rico in many terms. In 1917, the U.S. Congress passed the Jones Act, which imposed U.S. citizenship on the Puerto Rican people just in time to draft them to fight in WWI. This act gave the U.S. formal military, political and economic control over the island under the guise of bringing democracy and protection to Puerto Rico. The Jones Act remained in effect until 1952, when the U.S. Congress approved Public Law 600. This "permitted" Puerto Ricans to draft their own constitution within "certain guidelines".

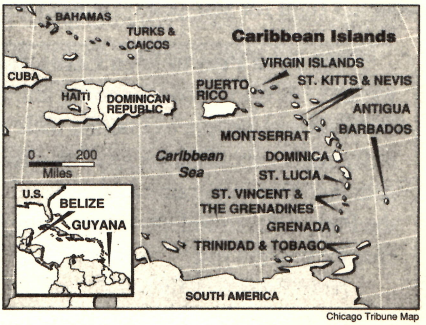
These guidelines were the same, though, as the Jones Act and maintained U.S. control of defense and international, economic and political relationships. Now, the Puerto Rican people elect who serves Washington D.C. Public Law 600 made it appear that Puerto Rico was more of an equal partner with the U.S. But, as Representative Joseph Mahoney stated at the time,"The U.S. Constitution gives the U.S. Congress complete control, and nothing in the Puerto Rican Constitution could affect or amend or alter that right." Today, the U.S. wants to change Puerto Rico's status and is looking for a way to "wash its hands" of the economic problems and keep U.S. military bases on the island, and at the same time appease international pressure.

**Many ask, "What would Puerto Rico do without our help?"**

Puerto Rico was a self-sufficient nation before the U.S. invaded in 1898. It could be self-sufficient if the U.S. were to return Puerto Rico to the Puerto Rican people. Food stamps and other welfare programs are a continuation of the dependent relationship in which the U.S. places Puerto Rico. The U.S. economic policy of industrialization and destruction of agriculture created the "need" for welfare programs. Food stamps are one of many things that perpetuate the myth that Puerto Rico could not survive without U.S. support.

**What has been the response of the Puerto Rican people?**

Puerto Ricans have always opposed Spanish and U.S. colonialism. Resistance takes many forms. In the 1930s, the Nationalist Party headed by Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos led a mass movement for independence against U.S. control and economic exploitation of Puerto Rico. The Nationalist struggle for independence culminated in the Jayuya Uprising of 1950. In this uprising, the Nationalists and supporters seized the mountain town of Jayuya along with neighboring towns where they proclaimed the 2nd Republic of Puerto Rico. Five days later,



Chicago Tribune Map

the Puerto Rican National Guard and the U.S. Air Force quashed the insurrection. Many people were killed and thousands were imprisoned. In the 1960s and 1970s, *independentistas* led opposition to ROTC and military recruiting. Presently, on the island there are community groups confronting environmental destruction and the U.S. military presence, as well as clandestine organizations that wage armed struggle against their colonizer. These forces are building a movement to get the U.S. out.

**Why does the Puerto Rican independence movement organize in this country?**

Because the independence movement is part of the Puerto Rican nation forced to emigrate due to U.S. colonialism. Puerto Ricans find only low paying jobs, racism and urban poverty when they arrive in the U.S. One never hears the term "Puerto Rican-American" because Puerto Ricans do not think of themselves as "American." They are Puerto Rican. This belief in themselves and their nation has enabled them to confront the U.S. in this country. The Puerto Rican independence movement plays a leading role in educating people in this country and offers an alternative to colonialism.

**Why should North Americans oppose colonialism in Puerto Rico?**

The U.S. will not voluntarily surrender Puerto Rico because of its economic and military importance. What will force the U.S. off the island is a strong and defiant movement that challenges this government. It is our country that is colonizing another. We have a responsibility to hold our government accountable for what it is doing. As North Americans, we can speak out and take a stand against colonialism and support a people's fight for self-determination and independence.

The **Free Puerto Rico Committee** is a national organization that works to develop understanding and support for the struggle of the Puerto Rican people to liberate their nation and to establish an independent socialist society. We have written materials, speakers, slide and film programs available on the history and current state of the Puerto Rican independence struggle. Please write or call the chapter nearest you.

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